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ABSTRACT

Narrative research offers unique possibilities for fostering dialogues of discovery between oneself and others. There is an increasing use of narrative inquiry within the field of educational research. A researcher's work with a Hmong refugee from Laos illustrates representational and interpretive dilemmas in narrative research. Narrative dialogues between the researcher and subject are presented as juxtaposed stories and interpretations, transcribed conversations, and reflections on the place of the poetic voice in narrative research. It is emphasized that narrative research has the power to bring together stories of informants and researchers, transforming the story and the participants in the process. This process helps both the researcher and the subject recover memories, renegotiate the present, and reconsider the possibilities of change. At the same time, the researcher, as a social scientist, must acknowledge that the ability to "know" through a research process has its limitations, and that the reward of narrative research is in its journey. An appendix contains an interview transcript. (Contains 47 references.) (SLD)

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Known in Part:

Transforming the Story, the Teller, and the Narrative Researcher

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Known in Part: Transforming the Story, the Teller, and the Narrative Researcher

by Donald F. Hones

In Keeping Slug Woman Alive (1993), Greg Sarris reflects on the difficulties he experiences and the insights he gains from doing the life history of Mabel McKay, a Pomo medicine woman whom he has known since childhood. He concludes that such work is best envisioned as a dialogue of discovery of the self and the Other:

> In understanding another person and culture you must simultaneously understand yourself. The process is ongoing, an endeavor aimed not at a final and transparent understanding of the Other or of the self, but at continued communication, at an ever-widening understanding of both (6).

In this paper I explore the unique possibilities offered by narrative research for fostering such "continued communication" between the self and Others, and suggest that through a narrative dialogue with diverse Americans, we can gain a deeper understanding of who we have been, who we are, and who we would become.

I begin with an overview of narrative as a mode of inquiry and address representational and interpretive dilemmas arising in my life history work with Shou Cher, a refugee from Laos. Next, I present a series of narrative dialogues between Shou Cher and myself as researcher. These dialogues take the form of juxtaposed stories and interpretations, transcribed conversations between Shou and I, and reflections on the place of the poetic voice in narrative research. I conclude with some suggestions for others who may wish to explore the use of life history narrative in their own journeys between the academy and the community, between the self and the Other.

Narrative Inquiry

There is an increasing use of narrative inquiry within the broader field of educational research. Phillips (1994) traces the history of educational inquiry from naturalistic social science to hermeneutics to narratives, a history marked by "the gradual erosion of the positivist model of man...and the struggle to replace it with a model that more adequately reflects what we humans take to be the nature of ourselves as thinking, feeling, and sometimes rational creatures"(14).

Much importance in qualitative research today is placed on meaning-making and folk psychology (Bruner, 1990). Bellah, et al. (1985) suggest that social science, when utilizing interpretive methods, can become "a form of self-understanding or self-interpretation" as it "seeks to relate the stories scholars tell to the stories current in the society at large" (301) The integration of historical, sociological, psychological and cultural perspectives to describe the lives of others allows for what Rabinow and Sullivan (1987) call the return to the hermeneutical circle, or "circle of meaning" that is a goal of interpretive social science.

Narrative research takes hermeneutics one step further by arguing that people understand their lives and explain their lives through stories, and these stories feature plots, characters, times and places. Polkinghorne (1995) argues that the narrative is "the linguistic form uniquely suited for displaying human existence as situated action" (5). Clandinin and Connelly (1994) suggest that the reconstructed stories of people's lives are a fundamental educational tool:

> People live stories, and in the telling of them reaffirm them, modify them, and create new ones...Stories...educate the self and others, including the young and those, such as researchers, who are new to their communities (415).

Moreover, noted scholars in many fields have suggested that the study of individual lives over time is indispensable for social inquiry (see, for example, Cremin, 1988; Gardner, 1994; Clausen, 1993). In anthropology Rabinow (1977) and Crapanzano (1980) have explored the difficulties and possibilities of combining life histories with cultural analysis; in psychology, life history has often been part of the study of personality development over time (White, 1952; Erikson, 1950 and 1962); and in sociology, individual life histories have been woven into community mosaics (Becker, 1970; Terkel, 1972). Such biographical work encompasses C. Wright Mills' (1959) contention that "Man is a social and an historical actor who must be understood, if at all, in close and intricate interplay with social and historical structures" (158).

Representation and Interpretation

In narrative research stories are what the inquirer collects, retells, and writes. Central to the construction of a narrative are time, place, character and multiple researcher "I's": "The 'I' who speaks as researcher, teacher, man or woman, commentator, research participant, narrative

critic, and theory builder."(416) Greg Sarris (1993, 1994) offers an interesting viewpoint on how to represent the interaction and dialogue between a researcher and a protagonist. Sarris found that the ethnographic interviewing methods in which he was trained at Stanford University were inadequate in representing the life of Mabel McKay, a Pomo Indian medicine woman whom he had known personally since childhood. Once, when driving McKay back to the Rumsey Reservation after her lecture at Stanford, Sarris sought her help in identifying a major theme for her life history:

> "Mabel, people want to know about things in your life in a way they can understand. You know, how you got to be who you are. There has to be a theme."
>
> "I don't know about no theme."
>
> I squirmed in my seat. Her hands didn't move. "A theme is a point that connects all the dots, ties up all the stories."
>
> "That's funny. Tying up all the stories. Why somebody want to do that?"
>
> "When you write a book there has to be a story, or idea, a theme..."
>
> "Well, theme I don't know nothing about. That's somebody else's rule." (Sarris, 1994:5)

Sarris reflects on what McKay's stories teach him about life and about himself, and he suggests that the goal of his work is to "chart dialogues that open and explore interpersonal and intercultural territories" (1993:5).

Denzin (1994) identifies several major research paradigms which influence the interpretation of narrative texts. One popular postpositivist interpretive style involves the use of grounded theory. As developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), grounded theory does not seek to force data to conform with existing theory, but rather develops theory and interpretive categories that are "grounded" in the data itself. For example, Ruth and Oberg (1992) used grounded theory to analyze the collected life stories of several women, grouped qualitatively similar life stories together into categories, and then labeled the categories by their dominant qualities. Thus, commonalities existing across life stories were uncovered. A constructivist interpretive style makes use of grounded theory as well as inductive data analysis and contextual interpretation. The goal of constructivist interpretation is to triangulate various data sources that are credible, transferable, dependable, and confirmable. Critical theorists use an interpretive style that seeks

to engage the voices and collaboration of oppressed groups of people within the framework of a neo-Marxist cultural critique of social structures. Poststructural interpretive styles are varied, yet have certain tenets in common. Denzin makes an important distinction between positivist and post-positivist types of analysis and the analytical frameworks employed by post-structuralists. Unlike the former, post-structuralists do not rely on preconceived categories, and do not seek to impose their theoretical frameworks. Rather, their goal is to let "the prose of the world speak for itself," and they highlight multivocality and multiple perspectives (511). Denzin's interpretive style of choice involves the organizing of life histories around "epiphanies," important, life-shaping events, using a poststructuralist interpretive framework he calls *interpretive interactionism*. This style "begins and ends with the biography and the self of the researcher," and encourages personal stories that are thickly contextualized, and "connected to larger institutional, group and cultural contexts" (510-511). Moreover, the stories presented in the text "should be given in the language, feelings, emotions, and actions of those studied" (511).

Writing the Life History of Shou Cher

In representing and interpreting the life history of a Hmong American, I made use of the following methods drawn from narrative inquiry: Following the advice of Polkinghorne (1995), Smith 1994) and others, I chose a single protagonist and sought to develop a plot, and describe fully the setting and characters. Like Grumet (1991) and Mcbeth and Horne (1996), I was concerned with representing my informant's story in a respectful manner, and with including him in the process of analysis and interpretation. Furthermore, like Coles (1964) and Sarris (1994), I sought a form for this story that allowed for the representation of the dialogue between myself and my informant, and for substantial passages of my informant's "voice." Moreover, I wished to use narrative forms that engage readers aesthetically as well as critically (Brunner, 1994). My interpretation of this life history narrative had three dimensions: First, through the arrangement of the story itself, punctuated by epiphanies experienced by my informant (Polkinghorne, 1995; Denzin, 1994); secondly, through the contextualization of my informant's life within history, culture and the social milieu; and thirdly through the identification of emergent themes, drawing

on a combination of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and Denzin's (1994) interpretive interactionism.

The Protagonist

Every one of us has stories to tell about our lives, and many of these stories could be of educational interest. Therefore, it is important for the researcher to narrow the quest for potential protagonists somewhat, perhaps by posing questions to oneself: Is there a particular educational problem I would like to explore through biography? Would I like to examine this problem through the life of a teacher, a student, a parent, and/or a community member? Is there a particular sub-group of the general population that is of interest? When I thought about these questions, I realized that the "problem" I was interested in was the role of education in assimilating (or facilitating the adaptation of) new immigrants into American society. Because of my experiences as a teacher of adults and a father, I was interested in doing the biography of a parent who had children in the schools. Finally, a long-standing interest in linguistic and cultural minority communities led to my decision to look for a protagonist among the Hmong refugee community. There is a limited but growing literature about the life experiences of the Hmong in America (see, for example, Chan, 1994; Ungar, 1995; Donnelly, 1994; and Santoli, 1988). Although I do not speak Hmong and have not visited Southeast Asia, I felt that by exploring the life of a Hmong adult, one of the newest Americans, I would learn more about the Hmong, myself, and the meaning of "being American."

Not being a member of the Hmong community, I was fortunate to have the assistance of a Hmong community liaison who worked at an elementary school where I did research. This liaison spoke with members of his community, and then suggested I talk to Mr. Cher, a new member of the bilingual staff at the school. When I met Shou later at his house, I found myself in the presence of someone with a special vitality and warmth. He was a handsome man in his mid-thirties, with dark hair, bright eyes, and a lively, expressive face. Shou was delighted to share stories about his life with me, and became an enthusiastic participant in this research.

His articulateness in English, his charisma, the multiple roles he plays in life and his receptiveness to the inquiries of a stranger made Shou Cher an ideal protagonist for life history research. With some of my previous Hmong informants my inability to communicate in Hmong or Lao limited our conversations to minimal questions and responses in English. Shou and I were able to have long discussions about a variety of issues, and this facilitated the greater representation of his "voice" in the text. Shou's charismatic presence in the local Hmong community facilitated my meeting with other Hmong adults and children, many of whom could be found visiting the Chers in their home in the evenings. I became aware of the variety of roles that Shou Cher played: He is a husband and father of seven school-age children; he is an active member of his clan council, working specifically on ways to heal the generational rifts in the Hmong community; he is a bilingual assistant and community liaison for a local elementary school; and he is an evangelical minister. Finally, like the various members of the Hmong community, I was always made to feel welcome in Shou's home, his church, and his workplace. Coming from our disparate linguistic and cultural backgrounds, we were able to form a friendship and converse about the new America that is coming into being.

The "outside" research I conducted was comprised largely of audio taped, semi-structured interviews and notes from participant observation. Over the course of six months I spent frequent evenings at the Cher home, especially on Saturdays, the one night of the week Shou Cher usually had free. I also spent a few hours each week at Kallen school, interviewing, observing, and volunteering in music activities and on the playground. In addition, I also spent an afternoon as a guest at Shou's church, attending Sunday school and the service.

Interviews were conducted with several informants, principally Shou Cher, the protagonist of this life history; members of his immediate and extended family; members of his church and the Windigo Hmong community, and his coworkers and employers at the Kallen school. Because I am unable to communicate in Hmong, the first language of many of my informants, all interviews were conducted in English. When necessary, Shou Cher, who has

strong communication skills in four languages, has helped interpret for me, especially when I was a guest at his church.

Interpreting data collected from interviews, participant observation, artifacts and library research in order to craft an educational life history is always problematic, but moreso when one's protagonist has very different cultural and linguistic practices than one's own. By taking seriously the dialogical (Bakhtin, 1981) relationship between myself, my informants, and our subject matter, I sought to overcome any initial hesitation on the part of my informants. However, dialogue, encompassing the sharing of stories, information, and interpretation between informant and researcher, raises Clifford's (1988) intriguing question, "Who is actually the author of field notes" (45)? Subjects of ethnographic studies have influenced the direction of research in many subtle or more blatant ways (see, for example, Rosaldo, 1980). To what extent will Shou Cher, as well as other informants, author this research? By proposing a life history format, I acknowledge my part in deciding what is included, what is left out, and how the story is arranged on the printed page. However, by regularly sharing relevant sections of my field notes and interview transcripts with Shou Cher, his family, and other informants, I hope to allow them to interpret the text of this life history with me, and to produce vignettes of immigrant life that are meaningful both to the Chers and to educators and policy makers. In order to create a meaningful life history I seek to document the "circles of meaning", the everyday common sense understanding of the Chers themselves, what Geertz (1983) calls the "native's point of view."

The representation and interpretation of Shou's life history has been influenced by his reading and our discussion of various drafts of the text. Shou, perhaps because of his early training in Hmong song, enthusiastically supported the rendering of some of his oral speech as poetry. Moreover, throughout the text he added additional information or, in some cases, advocated that some information be left out. I would like to discuss two of these instances, since they illustrate both Shou's part in fashioning the research text as well as the importance he places on maintaining strong relationships within his family.

In one of our first interviews Shou recounted to me a dream he had in Chicago that influenced his decision to go to theological school. After I showed him my initial rendering of this dream as a poem, Shou told me that it some of it was missing. When I replied that I had transcribed everything on the audio tape, he brought over a marker and a drawing board and explained the dream to me again, diagramming the action from his village in the mountains, along the path through the fields, to the deep, dark jungle. After this initial explanation, he closed his eyes and, speaking rapidly, retold the dream again, adding quite a few details. When he saw the second draft of this dream, he added one more part that he said was missing: The closing dialogue between he and his wife, as they prepared to be parted until the arrival of the "second ark." Through the additions of these details the text of the dream more than doubled in length.

His chief concerns were with parts of the text that he felt might reflect badly on members of his family. Sections that he particularly wanted to edit involved episodes where his brothers did not measure up to the expectations of their father. Because of Shou's concerns, details in some of the stories concerning the relationships between his father and his brothers have been deleted.

Dialogues

Shou Cher's dramatic life history includes a shooting incident that left him for some time with a sense of "not belonging to this Earth;" religious convictions that have both helped Shou adjust to a new land and new circumstances, but which have also caused some divisions within his family; and a commitment to "making peace" among the children he works with at a school, within his family and community, and with America. I have not experienced the profound sense of dislocation, the economic poverty or the urban violence that have marked Shou Cher's adult life, yet, in another fashion, our dialogue together has made me reconsider my own sense of "not belonging" in a scholarly community that at times seems far removed from my roots and my dreams; the religious divisions in Shou's family have been paralleled to some degree in my own, where evangelical Protestantism of children has caused strife with Catholic parents; and through

my interactions with Shou Cher I have also come to see the importance of making peace with my work at the university, my past, and my hopes for the future.

I Do Not Belong to this Earth

I begin at a point in one of our first interviews where Shou told me the story of how he was shot in the back outside a convenience store near his home, his recovery in a local hospital, and his feelings when the doctors told him he could go home:

But after I came from the hospital, the first week, I'm gonna tell you what I thought.

I said:

There isn't any solid place,
any place of peace on Earth.
There isn't.
I stayed in the hospital for two weeks.
I disown that place.
The hospital is not my place.
They said:
You can go home.
And I don't have a home to go to.
This house I live in is not my house.
Not my home.
I live by the money.
This place belongs to someone else.
It's not my house.
I don't belong to this Earth.

Besides, I am scared.
I do not know if
the next day I will get shot again.
I don't trust going outside.
I do not know how I should live.
I do not want to stay by the window.
I don't want to live in this area.
I don't want to live anywhere.
I don't belong to this Earth.

Five days after I got shot,
My mother fell on the cement sidewalk.
And all her face got bruised and scratched.
She does not know why.
And that even brought me lower.
I said,
Why did that happen?
And when I came back
her mouth was still kind of swollen,
her face was still bruised and scratched.
And I said,
Oh no.

Why me?
Why me?
My mother also said,
This Earth does not belong to us.
We do not belong to this Earth.

The only good thing we experienced at that time
is when we said,
We don't belong to the Earth.
We belong to Heaven,
where we should go.
And we should keep going until we are there.

When I first heard Shou tell about these feelings in an early conversation in his living room, I was immediately moved by his profound sense of displacement and homelessness. "I Do Not Belong to This Earth" captures a feeling of a refugee who has lost a homeland, family and livelihood, and who almost lost his life in the place where he sought refuge. This theme of homelessness and alienation is a familiar one in the histories and autobiographies of the immigrant experience in the United States (Handlin, 1951; Takaki, 1993; Covello, 1958; Rodriguez, 1982). We can learn to empathize by listening to the voices of persons such as Shou Cher who have been displaced by such quotidian aspects of post-WW2 life as war, political persecution, *ethnic cleansing*, and the economic and social chaos which accompanies the ascendancy of global market economies.

Yet, despite the profound differences in our lived experiences, Shou's expression of alienation forces me to confront my own feelings of not belonging. Raised in a large family with lots of love and relatively few material possessions, I have often felt that I didn't belong in a society where worth is measured more often by the level of one's consumption than by one's relationships. Moreover, because of my interest in learning about other cultures, other people, and other ways of knowing, I have pursued a career in education; yet, as I move toward the completion of my Ph.D., I find that life in the academy has isolated my more and more from the life and the people for whom I care.

The Sacrifice

When I was a teenager two of my elder brothers became involved in a fundamentalist Christian sect that was popular on college campuses in those days. I remember that it was a very traumatic time for the family, but especially for my mother, for whom Roman Catholicism has always been a refuge when there was trouble at home, the helping hands of a godmother, a kindly priest passing out oranges to poor children at Christmas. The new beliefs of my brothers challenged the church that had been the foundation for my mother's life. At one point, away at college, I decided to write a letter to one of my brother elder brothers. In it I upbraided him for hurting our mother, for belonging to a religious *cult* , for being a follower of an *unscrupulous, deceitful* leader. I put into that letter all the angst and superlatives of a nineteen year-old who was afraid that his family was falling apart. My brother never responded, and it was several months before we would be able to talk to each other again. My mother, the one I thought I was trying to protect--she it was who told me how deeply I had hurt him.

When I asked Shou if his conversion to Christianity caused any difficulties within his family, he told me the following story:

"Did I tell you about when my father died? I don't know if Americans have this practice, but when someone dies, for a certain period of time you bring back the spirit, and make the last visit. And that's it. That was the last ceremony for my father, and that took place on Christmas Day. And I was a Christian, and so was my wife. So we did not want to participate in the ceremony. The only way we could help, and we tried our best, was to prepare the wood for the fire, to cook. So we did. And then we went and we participated in the Christmas events. So, halfway through the day my wife came and said that my family was not happy with what I did. We were new Christians, so I asked advice from the church elders there.

'What should I do?' They said:

'Don't worry, you stay here.'

'Don't worry.'

"So we did. And, in the middle of the day, we came home, and I saw my uncle sleeping on our bed for some reason. He cursed us:

'You did not visit your father's spirit at the receiving ceremony. Because of that you will not have any children!'

It was about six months later that my wife had the miscarriage, but that was caused by the phenomenon. Because of that curse, I went back to my friends who were Christians. They said:

"'Don't worry. Because God's power is even more powerful than their curse. If you did something against God, then that curse would come true. But you didn't do anything against God.'

'*God is your father.*'

'So don't worry.'

"So I did not worry, but when (the miscarriage) happened, I prayed to God to not let that happen any more. Now we have kids, thanks to God!"

I ask, "Were you able to say goodbye to your father in your own way?"

"No. To the Christian theology, we don't have anything to do with that at all. Because we believe that, according to Romans, 1:19-20, anyone who has not received Jesus Christ yet, his spirit will go directly to Hell.

I am astounded by this statement. Here was a son who seems to have loved his father, and who yearned for the respect of his father; yet, there is no room in Shou's adopted religion for the souls of those who died "unreached." I ask: "But someone like your father, who probably did not have much familiarity with Christianity..."

Shou remains firm in his response: "He knew about it. He had been taught. My sister who was a nurse with General Vang Pao, she was a Christian when she came back (from Long Chieng). She got sick, and she prayed, and after some days she got well. So she encouraged our whole family to become Christians, but my father denied her. Of course, he did not know or understand everything, that's why he denied. But he heard about Jesus Christ. But I don't know how she proclaimed the Gospel at that time. I think that she just said that we should become

Christians. We should drop or get rid of the way we traditionally worshipped. And my father denied her. That's all I remember."

I find myself insisting on the father's innocence: "Maybe it was difficult for him to take the Gospel from a woman, and his daughter. That might have made it more complicated, too."

Shou responds, "She, herself, was not a very strong Christian. But she denied our shaman when she was sick. Now she is in France. She asked me to preach for her one time!" Laughing, he continues. "All my brothers and sisters in the United States are Christians. And my mother is a very strong Christian, but back at that time, at my father's spirit ceremony, she was not." Shou seems to feel that, although the messenger, his sister, may have been inadequate, his father should not have rejected the message that so many other members of the family were to embrace.

Reflecting further on his actions at the time of his father's spirit ceremony, Shou says:

"I do not know. My father, physically, was a righteous man. He did not do anything wrong. He practiced righteous things. But still he worshipped certain spirits which are not God. But I do not know why! Perhaps I did not show respect by not attending the spirit ceremony...I was just trusting God so much that I did not do anything! But because I am her son, my mother did not say anything bad. But she was not very happy. She said, 'You should not do this. And when you do this, your uncle is very upset.'

"That night,
because of that curse,
it hurt me, my wife, and my sister,
it hurt us a lot.
I remember that night
it hurt us a lot.
My sister was not able
to deny the ceremony herself,
so she participated.
She was with them.
But when I came back from the Christmas events, we went to
a place on the outskirts of the camp where
there were no people,
below the school buildings,
and we prayed.

We said,
'God, we do not want to hurt anyone.
But now we are hurt, and
we do not know what to do..'

And when we prayed, we were crying.
I, my wife, and my sister said,
'We do not want that curse, but
we have no choice,
because of You
we do this.'
After we prayed, we came back."

Running throughout this story of his father's death is the theme of sacrifice: Shou was willing to sacrifice his father, the love of some members of his family, and his hopes for children of his own because of his love of God. God asked Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, his son, his future; Shou Cher is asked to sacrifice both father and son, past and future on Earth in return for the heavenly kingdom. Harding (1992) has documented this theme of sacrifice in the stories of another trained evangelical minister: Reverend Cantrell tells her the story of how he killed his son in a farming accident. Like the story of God's sacrifice of his son Jesus to save mankind, Cantrell, according to Harding's interpretation, has sacrificed his own son to save *her*, the interviewer, *the unreached.*

Unlike Reverend Cantrell's tale, Shou's story of multiple sacrifices does not seem intended to *save* me. Is this sacrificial tale one that he wishes his children to remember? Does it serve to help him renew his own efforts in the ministry? Perhaps Shou's sacrifices made in the refugee camp help to recreate for himself an identity as a sojourner, not of this Earth, whose Father and home is in heaven.

There is yet another dimension to this story: Stripped of its religious veneer, it is a story of the need for belonging in a family, on the part of Shou, and the sense of betrayal expressed by his uncle. In such cases, who is more hurtful? The ones who, through their convictions, refuse to go along with established family religious practices? Or the ones who, like Shou's uncle, or myself, presume to place ourselves in the position of judgment, presumably to defend a father, or a mother, from further hurt?

Making Peace with America

Its quite late, and the children have all gone upstairs. Though we sit just a few feet apart in his quiet living room, the shadows separate Shou and I, and his strong facial features melt into

the darkness. We talk about images of immigrants in America, and what it means to be an American.

Shou says, "Back in Milwaukee, when I had an ESL teacher, we studied about the Roman world. The Romans had a way of becoming citizens, too. It was quite interesting to me. I have very, very little idea about politics. But I talk openly. We were talking about the United States compared to the Roman Empire in Milwaukee. The Roman Empire was very powerful, but they fell. They fell. And our teacher asked, 'What do you think? What do you think about the United States? Will it fall some day too?' When I look at it today, it could fall. It could fall."

I can't help thinking of the anti-immigrant mood which has been growing of late in America, and has influenced immigration reform legislation in Congress, English Only initiatives, and a good deal of racial and ethnic strife. The Hmong, in fact, due to their high levels of poverty and dependence on public welfare as well as their maintenance of strong cultural traditions, have helped influence at least one writer to advocate a moratorium on immigration (Beck, 1994). To Shou I say: "In the United States, a lot of people will say that the trouble is the people who want to maintain their culture or their language. Some people see this as a threat. They say that is going to destroy America. If you want to speak Hmong and keep Hmong traditions with your kids, that is a threat. If people want to keep Mexican traditions who are living here, that is a threat. If people speak other languages than English, some people think that is a threat, and will destroy America."

Thoughtfully, Shou responds: "The way I see it, that could happen. But that is not a very big concern to me. Talking back to when the Hmong people helped the American people fight the war in Laos. Suppose that idea carries on, and the Hmong people, population, which grows in the United States, they keep their strength, they keep their idea, and they keep their principle of leading, and they keep their principle of fellowship. Then suppose America somehow becomes politically unstable, then the Hmong people are among those who could help. Because they just help those whom they trust."

Shou Cher hasn't always trusted America and Americans. After being shot in 1994, he did not feel that he had a home in America, and became more distrustful of those who were not members of his Hmong community. Interestingly, his attitudes about Americans and America have changed substantially since he has been placed in the position of liaison between the Hmong, the school, and the society. Shou says his work has changed him, has made him feel more whole, less alienated:

Before this job as community liaison,
isolation
was always in front of me.
I isolated myself from African-Americans,
I isolated myself from Mexican-Americans,
I isolated myself from other Americans.
And now I can say
that is not right.

Many different peoples live in the same town
black, brown, yellow
if they look a certain way, they have
their own community.
I don't deny it,
it is good to serve your own community.
Please do your best for them.
But then you should
treat others nicely, too.
black, white, brown, yellow
we are the same people.
We are different in skin only,
but we are all human.
We are the same, created by God,
one creator,
and it is very beautiful.
Different colors, and very beautiful.

"At Kallen school we have many, many cultures, but we focus on the major culture: which is the community, the city you live in, and the country where you live! I know that there are some things you cannot add to this culture--of course not! But something that we learn to adapt ourselves to. It's American culture. But that does not mean "white" culture. America, even though I am not a citizen yet, America is this country, is my country!"

Shou's life experiences have taught him that all things must change, and have prepared him to adapt to meet the challenges of new languages, cultures, and economic and social realities. Intrinsically he realizes that children growing up in America must adapt to the

dominant cultural and linguistic norms of the nation. Yet he has also laid claim to the American experience: This is his country, even if he is not a citizen yet. This country must honor the experiences of all of its people, black, brown, yellow, white. American culture, for Shou, is like the *pandau* of the Hmong: In order to tell the story, you must weave together threads of many colors.

Through my dialogue with Shou Cher I have become newly aware of the importance of making peace with my self, my life in the academy, and America. Such peacemaking need not mean compromising my goals or my principles, for I intend to continue on a path that will allow me to reconnect my work with my sense of family and community, and to participate in the transformation of a consumer-driven society through a series of small steps.

The Poetic Voice

At several points I have chosen to arrange the narrative text as a poem. Several anthropologists and folklorists have argued that the rhythmic repetitions and formulaic language present in traditional oral cultures such as the Hmong should be represented in the form of poetry instead of prose (Tedlock, 1983; Conquergood, 1989). Tedlock has written:

> If anthropologists, folklorists, linguists, and oral
> historians
> are interested in the full meaning
> of the spoken word
> then they must stop treating oral narratives
> as if they were reading prose
> when in fact they are listening to dramatic poetry (1983:123)

Sociologist Laurel Richardson (1992) takes this concern with aesthetic representation one step further by suggesting the poetic in apparently bland stories of ordinary Americans such as "Louisa May:"

> It was purely chance
> that I got a job here,
> and Robert didn't.
> I was mildly happy.
>
> After 14 years of marriage,
> that was the break.
>
> We divorced.

A normal sort of life (128).

In seeking to represent lived experience in ways that reaffirm the lives of those being studied, Richardson used poetic structures to engage both the emotions and the critical minds of readers. Along with the work of Tedlock and Richardson, Conquergood's (1989) life story of a Hmong shaman, presented as an epic poem, has been particularly influential in my decision to occasionally represent the emotive power of Shou Cher's narrative in poetic form. These occasions were few, and tend to come at points where Shou Cher is narrating particular life crises.

Several issues are apparent in the representation of episodes in Shou Cher's life as poetry. First is the issue of language, and whether or not the "voice" of the protagonist is best represented in his exact words. Shou Cher is not a native speaker of English, and he makes occasional grammatical or speech errors. I felt that the meaningfulness of Shou's narrative to an English-speaking audience would be enhanced by correcting such errors. Another issue to is the representation of my own voice. For this episode, I made the decision to delete my questions and comments from the research text, and reconstruct it as a longer story in Shou's voice. I made this decision because I felt that, as a major event, or epiphany, in Shou's life, the story had an underlying cohesiveness which was somewhat fragmented by the inclusion of my short questions. Moreover, I felt the meaningfulness of the episode was enhanced when it was reported in Shou's words only, even as he described the dialogues he engaged in with hospital personnel and visitors. Finally, I made the decision to represent part of this episode as poetry. I was moved by Shou's description of his feelings when leaving the hospital, and I felt that, represented as poetry, and set off from the rest of the text by the use of italics, the emotive quality of this passage would be more clearly conveyed in the text than if it were represented as prose.

Narrative Research as a Dialogue

> For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; Now I know in part, but then I shall know fully, just as I also have been fully known.
>
> - 1 Corinthians, 13:12

Through our intertextual dialogues (Bakhtin, 1981), Shou Cher and I traveled on a path which moved between themes of alienation, conflict, peacemaking, and poetry. Alone in a quiet restaurant at closing time, we were able to share a final dialogue about the importance of remembering and sharing in coming to understand the self and the Other. I present part of that dialogue here without comment: As a refugee whose ability to adapt to a variety of shifting circumstances while maintaining a sense of inner continuity, Shou Cher bridges, for me, the beliefs of a traditional society with an awareness of multiple ways of knowing needed in the postmodern world. His thoughts on the value of life history research and the need for researchers who will share, and listen, have a value that I believe transcends any need for additional *interpretation*.

Remembering

Don: Has this been a process that you have found to be valuable for yourself, personally?

Shou: Yes. There are a couple of things. One is to recall my past life, and even recall the culture I grew up with, and any major events or points in my life--you know, if you don't talk back, then you just can't recall. You don't have someone to talk to about your past life. So it is recall those events in my past life. The other thing is when we study together, when we say it, record it, and write it down, it gives me a big lesson: I have probably made many mistakes in my past life, and I can learn many things from my previous life, too. Also, my son and the young people, how do they think about the old people, the parents. Parents and children, how do they think. That also corrects me--the way that I live, the way that I am a father, the way I correct my children.

Don: You talk about how you see your children differently when you share these kinds of things. One thing I notice is when you tell a lot of these stories, you talk about your relationship with your children, but you use examples of your relationships with your

father and your parents. Maybe another interesting part of remembering these stories is that you remember how you were: Maybe it was not exactly the same, it was a different country and a different time, but a similar age.

Shou: Yes, that's right. I know my childhood was somewhat different than my children's. How I acted toward my father and how my children act toward me is somehow different. Yet, I can still adapt something from it. What I did towards my father I thought was good, but *I did not know how my father thought about me*. Did he think I was a good boy, or not good? Sometimes I think that my children are quite naughty or they don't really obey my directions; but, to compare them with other children, my children are in some way even better. My children are satisfactory, not excellent, but we are only human. I can say that I made mistakes when I was a child, and I can see that my children make mistakes when I am a father.

Understanding the Self and Other

Don: You've given some good reasons for people to read about a life--your life, or other people's lives. I mean, every one of us has done things that other people can learn from. Do you think that this is also a story about the Hmong people--certainly your perspective of them, and not the whole story--but it does deal with some of the issues of the newest Americans who have come here. Do you think the story has an importance for other Americans to read, in terms of coming to understand each other?

Shou: Yes. I think it is important. They might think back to their young life, compared to my young life. They also might think about I as a father, compared to my children. It is good to compare the stories. The way I lived, when I was a young boy, I may never go back to live like that again. But it is in my brain.

Don: I really have benefited a lot from this project. I have learned a lot, not just about you, but about spiritual things, about parenting, about what it means to be educated--is that just school education, or what else does it mean?--a lot of different things. One thing I wonder about, as you think about doing this project, working with me in the role of a

researcher, someone who is trying to find things out, do you have any particular advice that you would give to other people such as myself, maybe who haven't done this kind of thing, but who want to understand the community better, or who want to understand education in a way that honors what the community knows? Do you have any advice for researchers, say, who might work with other people in the Hmong community or other people in the community, or to study other people's lives like yours? What would you suggest that they do?

Shou: I would think that asking the particular person whom you want to research about, make a special request: Can I do this? I will appreciate how important you are to me if I could do it. I think most people will accept the research. I do not know if other people will agree with me, but since you are asking a big favor, they would try to support you. I know working with someone who might not benefit you right away, it might not be a very good idea for you to say yes. But I myself, I am a generous person who will provide my own life to anyone who wants to hear it. Anyone who wants to do this kind of research, I think it is important to ask it as a big favor, and then be honest to the person, like what we are doing here today, and appreciate the job. I think that is the most important. Just spending time together like this is good. They could share their own personal lives, like what I share. If I am open, they should be open, too.

Now we know in part--part of a story, part of ourselves, part of the Others. At its best, narrative research has the power to bring together stories of informants and researchers, transforming the story and the participants in the process. In a quest for greater understanding of the self and the Other, we can recover our memories, renegotiate our present, and reconsider the possibilities of change within our communities, our nation, and our world. At the same time we can acknowledge, as social scientists, that our ability to *know* through a research process has limitations: Lives go on, stories are changed and reinterpreted, and there is no end. The beauty and the reward of narrative research comes through the journey.

Appendix A

Original Transcript of "I Do Not Belong to This Earth"

But after I came from the hospital the things that I think in my mind--now its quite changed, its changed a lot, but back to that time, the first week, I'm gonna tell you what I think, back to that time. I said,

There isn't any solid place, any place of peace on Earth. There isn't. I stay in the hospital or two weeks. I do not, I disown that place. The hospital is not my place. They said, you can go home. And I don't have a home to go . This house I live in which is not my house. Not my home. I live by the money. This place belongs to someone else. It's not my house. I don't belong to Earth.

Besides, I scared. I do not know if next day I get shot again. I don't trust going outside. I do not know how I should live. I do not want to stay by the window. I don't want to sit by the window. I don't want to live in this area. I don't want to live anywhere. I don't belong to this Earth.

These, there were a lot of things in my mind. And a couple, five days from the day I got shot, my mother, who stayed with me in this house, she prepared my youngest, my younger, my second youngest daughter going to kindergartner school. And somehow, she does not know why, she fell on the cement walking, sidewalk. And all her face got scratched and bruised, And she does not know why. And that even bring me lower. I said, Why that happen? And she has a problem too, she has a disease sometimes, too. And I said, Why she fall down. And she does not realize how, why, how she fall down. And when I came back her mouth still kind of

D: Swollen?

S: Swollen, her face was still, uh

D: Bruised?

S: Bruised and scratched, and swollen too. And I said, Oh no. Why me? Why me? So my mother also said, this Earth does not belong to us. We do not belong to the Earth.

So that's bad, but the only good thing by that time we experienced we say, we don't belong to the Earth. We belong to Heaven, where we should go. And we should go until we are there. That's the feeling back at that time. Very strong.

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